

The Argo

by Electromotive Force

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Summary: February 3, 2525: The day Harvest went quiet. First Lieutenant Brad Banga is sent to lead the crew of the Argo to investigate why. This was the day it all started...or was it?

## 1. Briefing

**\*\*Halo Genesis - Part I: The Argo\*\***

**\*\*Chapter 1 - Briefing**

><strong>**\*\*0230 Hours, 12 April 2525 (Military Calendar)/**

><strong>**\*\*Epsilon Eridani System, Planet Reach high orbit, Star dock 001-A\*\***

Another mission.

It felt like a triple header would to a professional athlete. Only this professional athlete would've hated his job. Brad murmured something spiteful under his breath as the fluorescent lights overhead automatically shot on.

A retina-etching, white glow pierced the haze of sleep straight to his eyes. The alarm pad blared next to the headboard of his bunk...too loud. Any other time it would be fine, but when he was resting? There were other units on standby.

He couldn't simply hit SNOOZE or tamper with the alarmâ€”certainly couldn't smash it like he wanted to. That would be punishable under the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Instead he just rose out of bed and stammered defiantly to the bathroom. Its incessant blare wouldn't go quiet until he contacted AIR STAFF just a few decks awayâ€”probably sleeping themselves; it was all automated. Half knowing it, he broadcasted his own audible tone stored in the memory cache of his neural net. "Let's see how they like Hate Breed

in the morning," he said through grinning teeth.

Waking up for a mission was definitely a hassle as of late, but he'd rather wake up in his quarters at Reach than any of the other Star Docks.

He looked in the mirror as he brushed his teeth. He was getting too old for this. The dimness in his once shiny and colorful, green eyes were testament enough to that. He took another look. His pure-blond hair was now a muted yellow of some sort and definitely not as thick or strong as it used to be. There was something more amiss to his outer shellâ€|

More scrutiny revealed that his muscle tone was also atrophying. His joints groaned in protest to his every move and his breathing was anything but deep and steady. When was the last time he felt whole?

He'd been running bombing missions for too long. So long, that he couldn't find any memory of true joy without twisting his own arm for it.

Then suddenly, he saw it. Not out of desire, but pure luck: A small picture clinging to the inner frame of the mirrorâ€"the picture of his wife and daughter. He could just imagine that fond moment so long ago in the wake of the image. The alarm in his bedroom faded away from existence and the memory obscured his very vision as if the present tense weren't even real. Fleeting images came into being forcefully and smoothly just as well.

He took a sigh, put on his flight suit, and looked down to just above the right breast pocket, to his nametapeâ€|

BANGA

The military owned himâ€|and for too long. He realized now that he should've stayed enlisted; he shouldn't have commissioned three years ago. Enlisted life wasn't as luxurious as an officer's, but at least then he wouldn't have held such responsibility, and so much headache.

He took his time getting ready. Maybe his recent, unruly attitude towards the war machine known as the Colonial Military Administration would work its way up the chain to the MAJCOM level. Maybe they wouldn't think he was so useful after allâ€"hopefully.

He only caught three hours of sleep since his last mission. It was a milk run over a rebel asteroid base in a far off system. Seven hours to the drop zone, a thirty minute sortie, and then another seven and a half back to station.

He was exhausted. All week command had put him and his crew through the ringer. This was definitely grounds for early separation in his book. Why would they call him up with only three hours of crew rest? Didn't they know that wasn't mission-safe? There were huge risks involved with that kind of safety negligence. Orders were orders though. Whatever. Just one year to retirement.

He strolled to the briefing room like the military worked for him. He reached the entry to MISSION PLANNING and everyone was already

there and by the looks of it, for a good while now. Brad's Commander didn't look so happy with his tardiness and his men were a little perplexed too. They must've felt the same as him by now, but they would never suspect the slightest dereliction of duty from their leaderâ€”from Brad.

"Good morning, Lieutenant Banga. Glad you could join us. Better late than never I suppose," hinted his Commander. The Colonel was usually laid back with his subordinates, but something told Banga he'd better tighten up today. He took his seat.

"\_Morning\_ is it?" Brad retorted. "I can't tell anymore, sir. Not when I'm running missions while I'm sleep walking," he said mockingly. He caught a brief glint of cooperative humor in his Commander's eyes, then it quickly faded. Colonel Sherr wasn't all that bad. His face was chiseled out of solid marble so you might as well bury any hope of figuring out what he was ever thinking, but those that knew him, knew he was down to Reach...for a wing commander anyway. "So what this time? A bomb run? No...Let me guessâ€”last-minute Humanitarian mission for the Senator's election campaign. Or is this just your cute little idea of a terribly late April Fool's?"

Colonel Sherr panned his steely gaze away from Banga and separately eyed each man. "What I'm about to tell you all, doesn't leave this room. You're all ordered to take one day of crew rest before your next mission, understood?"

No one spoke in reply, but they all indiscriminately nodded as if they were hive-mindedâ€”as one. Something was up. Once Colonel Sherr acknowledged their agreement, the lights overhead dimmed and in the middle, emerged a G2-class star of brimming amber. Three planets whisked around in tight, elliptical orbits, scraping the walls of the room. The star system rotated for one revolution and then slowly zoomed into a single planet of emerald-green forests, vast, blue expanses of ocean, opaque-brown highlands, and a fierce, pastel-white band of a storm current.

"So where's this?" asked First Lieutenant Selonke, Brad's navigator. "I don't recognize it from any of the pre-mission briefs."

"This is Harvest, an outer colony, taken from the CMA survey archives. This is not an up-to-date representation. You're being sent here to investigate a mishap."

"Investigate? Mishap?"

"Yes. As of military calendar 3 February, 1423 Hours, the Office of Naval Intelligence detachment at Harvest confirmed long-range contact with an unidentifiable ship. Class and tonnage are unknown. STRATCOM's assesment...is that it is an alien vesâ€”"

Before he could continue, Sherr sensed a stir amongst the men. He waited patiently. "So it wasn't a friendly encounter, sir?" asked Master Sergeant Pryor, Banga's crew chief.

"Well, let me finish. The mishap is that we lost contact. Whether it's because of these visitors or just a mistake, we don't know. This is where you all come in."

Banga was definitely awake now. He was the ranking individual of his squad so he felt like the one to ask all the questions. "How do we fit in, sir? We're just bombersâ€œ"

"Yeah," comm. officer Brahm cut in. "Shouldn't there be some ONI weirdoes out there who would just love to go?"

"I'm sure there is, but ONI has hand-picked you."

The crew rustled again. "We're being voluntold, I knew it," spoke munitions officer Dufraine. "They're whorin' us out to do the bitch work."

Banga wove a hand in the air to cut him off. "Sir, why specifically have they chosen us?"

"This crew has the best mission success record out of any fleet in any MAJCOM. You go when you're told, you release the payload with no questions asked, and you get home safely every time. Not only all that, but you all do it with record-breaking speed and efficiency. You can be counted on and you work well together. My gut says however, that you all are the most likely to make it back in one piece. That's why you're chosen."

"Somethin' told me we shouldn't be so damned good," chimed the MUNS officer once again. Banga shot him a look this time and the weapons expert hung his head in silence.

"You are taking this leave to get your personal affairs in order before your mission," Sherr reasserted. "You'll be introduced to your new ship, given your destination coordinates, and your specifics on the mission. Reconvene back here in twenty-four hours starting nowâ€œ|dismissed."

The commander strode to the exit and walked away. Banga and his crew sat there for a minute in quiet contemplation. Dufraine eyed the Colonel as he walked away, smirked once out of sight, and chewed on a strand of milk weedâ€œonly found on Earth. His girlfriend sent a vacuum-wrapped package of it to him every week.

Banga replayed the meeting in his mind. "Well finallyâ€œ|some \_excitement\_ in our lives," Banga chimed. He looked at all his men, but their empty stares reminded him of just how desperate that sounded. The words even rang hollow in his own ears. He took a deep breath and flexed his taut shoulders. "Either we go or we don't go," he said. "Look, if we find trouble we high tail it outta there, right? Just like in the booksâ€œ|just like we always did if we ever had trouble."

He could see more attention emanating from his men as he spoke. He was getting through to them. He never turned down a mission before, and he didn't want this one to be lost either. Even more, he wasn't about to turn down anything being so shortâ€œone more year until he was with his family on permanent vacation. His separation package had to look spotless to PERSCOM.

"Put it this way: We might be the first to see some aliens. How about that? You know if we decline, they'll hand us our walking papers and then what? We're outta the job, \_that's\_ what. So who's going?"

Dufraine picked his head up. "Even if we make it there and find out what happened, what's to say the aliens don't pull a fast one and blow us to bits or make us their guinea pigs, like in the movies?"

"Look guys, I know how laid back we've become. We're bombers, but that doesn't mean we're treated any better than the longswords or the skyhawks. We're in the military and we all took the oath at day one. I know this is off the books and it's not our style, but we \_have\_ to goâ€"all those people out there. We really don't even know if these visitors are hostile or not."

The rest of the men all looked around and at one another. They were definitely listening at this point, but still doubtful.

"It's probably just a misunderstanding anyways. Brahm, you know what kind of bullshit equipment we have to deal with sometimes, right? It's probably just a downed satellite out there."

Brahm arched an eyebrow in caution.

"Lookâ€|" Solemnly, he hung his head low for a moment to collect his thoughts. He looked back up at his men with sincerity written all over his face. "We've been doing this for ten years; the same thing everyday. We've been the best because we're there for each otherâ€|because we make the sacrifice. But whether we like it or not, this is our most important mission. This is the call of duty, boys."

Banga's navigator, First Lieutenant Selonke, was the first. "You know I'm in. I've never left you behind." Master Sergeant Pryor nodded in accordance. "Besides, who's gonna navigate for your ass if not me?"

"I'll go. What the hell, right?" said MUNS officer Dufraine. "Hazard pay alone has got to be enough to buy me that house on Earth."

"Count me in," said Brahm, the communications officer. "Once in a lifetime."

"Shit," said Pryor. "I'm a crew chief. I can't quit the Navy. They don't make warcraft on the outside."

Everyone laughed a bit, then looked at Second Lieutenant Holmes for his verdict. He was new, not too long out of Boot. Holmes was a real asset. It'd be a shame to lose him and all his knowledge and know-how on starship defense. They all knew he had the mettle for the job, but nothing was ever certain. After a moment's silence..."This is it, huh? The big deal. Sign me up, boss. Who's gonna shoot down the little green men if I don't go?"

"Alright! This is it," said Banga. Everyone stood at once. "You heard Sherr. Back here in twenty-four. Hug your mamas, kiss your wives, and tuck in your babies 'cause it's off to Harvest."

## 2. Send Off

\*\*Chapter 2 â€" Send Off\*\*

**\*\*0445 Hours, 13 April 2525 (Military Calendar)\*\***

**\*\*Epsilon Eridani System, Planet Reach high orbit, CMA star dock  
001-A\*\***

If she could just be there at this moment, that would make his day. It'd probably make hers too. "Please be there, please be there," Brad whispered to himself as he dialed in his wife's number.

His hands were shaky as he keyed the chatter. He placed one on the top of the metal frame and squeezed hard while he willed the other to make the call. She had to be thereâ€”\_had to be\_.

He thought about the upcoming mission, the colony, reasons why contact was lostâ€”just what he was trained to avoidâ€”the downward spiral. But he couldn't resist it. Had he really even weighed the consequences until now? He let his imagination roam into the negativeâ€”into destruction.

What did High Command think this mishap was, a damned ice cream social? Major Commands don't just \_fail\_ to report inâ€”especially after an event like meeting aliens.

Why Brad? Why not an entire fleet? What the hell?

In the back of his mind, he knew he felt troubled about the lack of precaution with this situation. Now, it particularly nabbed at him.

The brass still thinks this is just an error.

His internal tirade halted as something else took his mind. The link was queued and transmitting back to New Byzantiumâ€”to his wife. She had to be there or else he might not ever hear her voice again.

A few clicks, some noise bursts, and thenâ€”relief. "Hello," a smooth, tender voice answered.

"Babyâ€”baby, it's me."

"\_Brad\_."

"Hey, Hun. How are you?"

"I could be better," she hinted.

"Me too. Definitely me too."

"Another mission?"

"Yeahâ€”again."

"I guess I can't ask, right?"

"As usual," he said with a desolate laugh. "This is about all we ever talk about, huh?"

"Yeah," she agreed in a lighthearted tone. "Just be careful like always, Hun."

"Babe, do you ever regret meeting meâ€|marrying me?"

"What's going on, baby? I know that voice. What's up?"

"Nothing. I justâ€|looking back all these years, with me being gone all the timeâ€|do you ever wish things were different?"

"No. Brad, listen: I married a military man, who handles his affairs. I knew that the day I met youâ€|and I don't regret a single day. I want to be married to you when you come back from your mission and I want to be married to you after that. Come home safe. I need you. Vanessa needs you too."

"How is she since last time we spoke?"

"She's growing fast and getting heavy so I really need you around," she finished with a laugh. "Ooooh! I almost forgot! She took her first steps last Friday!"

"Wow." Brad bent his head to the groundâ€|smiled. Suddenly, his joy faded and the lines of his grin sank back into somber accretion. "I've been doing this for too long."

"I know, Bradâ€|I know. Do your duty, come home safe, and finish out your year. We'll be waiting like always. Promise me you'll be safe."

"I will, baby. I gotta go. The men need me now. I'll be there soon. And when I get there, I'm gonna hold you both and never let you goâ€|ever."

"Goodbye. Love you. I'll be thinking about you. Call when you can."

"Bye, Love."

He hesitated disconnecting the call as if the mission could be postponed by his discontent. This moment was precious and it felt hollowing to end it. He finally worked up the dare to disengage. Like the endless vacuum between them, the link faded into nothingness.

Dozens of aviators, navigators, technicians, crew chiefs, and any other figure of the flying community you could imagine walked briskly towards the secured hangar bay. An unusual addendum to the mix was a host of Intel analysts and ONI agents. The entourage cycled through a giant airlock normally meant to pass equipment through.

Banga, Selonke, Brahm, Dufraine, Pryor, and Holmes were among the first to clear the threshold. Echoes were plentiful in this cavernous expanse of the hangar bay normally meant to house entire squadrons of smaller, fighter-class vessels.

Ahead was a single space-faring vessel, a small section of hastily erected bleachers, a few rows of chairs, a podium and its accompanying PA system in the periphery, and a few high-ranking officers mulling around. There were already a few spectators seated, such as more ONI suits, higher-echelon political figures, and any other type of civilian that had 'the need to know'. Past all the

ruckus was Reach trying to squeeze in an appearance through the meter-thick, plexi-plate view ports.

Banga and his crew were instructed to take their seats in the first row of chairs. A few moments went by and then a commanding voice resounded through the hangar bay. "Admiral on deck!"

All the people present, minus civilians, stood in unison as a very high-ranking admiral stepped forth from the rear where the equipment airlock was. He strode past the bleachers, past the rows of chairs on either side of him, past all the occupants standing like statues, and towards the podium. Accompanying him was the Command Sergeant Major of Reach—the one who called the room to attention. They both stepped towards the podium as all the occupants kept their rigid stance.

Once to the stage, the Sergeant took his place just behind the Commander, then the Commander spoke up.

"At ease."

Everyone took their seats. Banga glanced once more at the ship in the background before the Admiral was about to deliver his inevitable speech. She was roughly one hundred meters from stem to stern by Banga's estimation, easily engulfing the speaker and the viewers present. Was it his crew's? Or was it a static display that authoritative figures in the military always favored?

"As most of you already know, contact with the colony of Harvest has been severed. Shortly before this misfortune, Harvest's orbital platform picked up an unidentifiable ship at long range. We strongly believe it to be extraterrestrial."

Some of the spectators who were uninformed to the new incident were stunned. You didn't even need to look around. You could feel the tension. Banga looked his men over as they exchanged smug glances with one another, already knowing the situation, and maintaining a conceited silence.

"Don't get ahead of yourselves," the Commander stressed loudly over the ambiance of the murmuring crowd. "We don't know if there is trouble or not." Once there was a substantial lull in the hum of the audience, the Admiral resumed. "We don't know much about the visitors since the colony failed to report in after initial contact. What we do know is that we must investigate. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the crew of the Argo," he said as he gestured a hand to Banga and his men.

The Sergeant in the background smartly raised an upward palm, motioning them to stand and come forth. They each complied and gathered around the Admiral. Banga and the crew had a comfortable niche in the limelight, but only on a squadron level. Taking the stage amongst so many unknowns was atypical. And there weren't the usual smiling or jealous faces amongst the crowd in their usual award ceremonies. Most were blank stares or sobered, solemn glances.

Paying no mind to the mood, the Admiral went to each member and shook each one's hand while camera flashes winked on amongst the crowd. He returned to the podium. "These brave men will carry on the inquest of

all mankind, hopefully to a brighter future with a new intelligent species. Good luck and God's speed to you all."

After more hand shaking, pictures, and greetings with the crowd, the crew was ushered off behind some novelty-like ropes where the ship wasâ€"past a trio of armed guards.

As he walked closer to his new ship, Banga noted the streamer painted on the tailfin. It was the picture of a boatâ€"an ancient oneâ€"one that traverses an ocean. Its forward tip was highlighted in gold and it reminded him of his studies in ancient mythology. It was the boat in which Jason sailed in quest of the Golden Fleece. The golden bow of the Argo was a gift from Athena, and had the power of speech and could warn of impending danger.

Argo was a fitting namesake indeed. Maybe the Admiralty weren't as uncultured as Brad always thought.

Colonel Sherr was there along with a few enlisted types whom none of the crew had ever met.

"Banga," the Colonel beckoned.

Brad quickly joined Sherr. "Yes sir."

"This is the ship you'll be taking to Harvest. It's one of a kind, built for missions like this. Take good care of her. These men will get you acquainted with it. Good luck. And listenâ€"

"â€"You're not heroes today, just scouts. You see trouble, you come back. Clear?"

"Yes sir."

"I've talked with ONI and we have an understanding. You'll find some last resorts on the Argo for all the reasons they could think of. But mostly, it's for the reasons we can't think of.

"Thank you, sir."

Banga tried not to pay any mind to it, but he had a nauseating hunch that this may be the last time he'd ever see Sherr again, but that sensation was expected on a mission like this. There was no getting around it. You just had to focus on what mattered and the feeling would eventually subside. He beat down the urge to ruminate over his wife's words echoing in the back of his mind.

"Sir," an enlisted technician spoke. "Let's take a look inside. I'll show you the cockpit."

The other noncoms rounded up the rest of Banga's crew and showed them their respective areas of the shipâ€"Selonke to the NAV terminal, Brahm to the communications consoles, Dufraine to the munitions hold, Pryor to the avionics and engine room, and Holmes to the weapons station.

Once inside the cockpit, Banga found himself quite familiar with the controls.

"Sir, you'll notice that we've adapted most of the avionics from a

B-22 Buzzard, the ship you normally fly."

"Damned Buzzards. Good stuff," Banga said as he slapped his flight cap against his thigh. "So this'll be a walk in the park for me and my men?"

"You bet, sir."

Banga took a few more moments to familiarize himself with the controls to make sure nothing was left a mystery for the mission to come. He wanted all angles covered.

Master Sergeant Pryor, the crew chief responsible for most of the equipment on the ship was in the rear hold with a couple of other technicians like himself. Banga approached his side.

"What do you think?"

"I love it," Pryor replied. "This has got to be an industry first here. Look at the propulsion systems. Notice anything?"

"Hell, I don't know what you wrench boys do back there," Banga said jokingly. "What am I looking at?"

"You're looking at a hot-swappable translight engine, that's what! If this thing needs maintenance, no space walks for me. I can run all the repairs from inside the ship. Not only that, but the architecture of this thing—it's like the depots and the R&D boys actually talk to each other now. Even though repair time is cut in half, this baby will never need one."

Pryor peeked around the tail end of the cargo bay to see if any un-allowed spectators were watching any of this. "This is the real deal, boss. What other kind of doodads are in here?"

"C'mon," Banga said. "I'll show you."

After Banga gave Pryor a tour of the cockpit, they ran into comm. officer John Brahm. "Guys," Brahm whispered. "Do you realize how much this ship is worth? The stuff in here only works in theory right now, or so I thought. These electronics aren't even supposed to be revealed to people like us you know. They're gonna reassign us when we're done with the mission. I know it."

"Tell me about it," Sergeant Pryor said. "I read up on this from time to time. This is not child's play. This is the whole tamale. I'm a little nervous just working with the stuff."

"So what have you got?" Banga asked Brahm.

"I've got the best signal arrays you can ask for. Everything; all frequencies at my disposal. I've got all the crypto you can imagine. Also—" He bent lower and his voice sank to a whisper. "—Ever heard of a contractor called Prowler?"

"Nope," said Banga "Can't say that I have."

Pryor shook his head.

"It's a government-contracted agency. They make airframes and various

electronics for the CMA. The government won't even trust its own people with this stuff. They have these top-bid civilians go for the big bucks when they need an ultra-classified piece of equipment made. It's all in here."

"What, exactly?" Pryor asked.

"Sensory-eclipsing technologyâ€"beyond state of the art. You'd need a doctorate just to understand the theory behind it."

"How do you know of it?"

"Every once in a while you hear from those friends in your career field that knows of a friend, who ran into a friend, who knows a guy, who's worked with it on a missionâ€"|\_you\_ know."

"So it's like electronic warfare?"

"Exactly, just to the extreme. Today's stealth and jamming has its limitations, as always, but not Prowler electronics. You justâ€"aren't there. Period."

"So basically, you're saying we can disappear?"

"We're a ghost in the wind."

"Well, that's good to know," Banga affirmed. "We may need that in case you-know-who decides they don't like us. Let's go see the others."

The three made their way through a few tight bulkheads and nearly bumped heads with MUNS officer Dufraine. He already knew the look on their faces. "Don't say anything," Dufraine said, peering into a monitor that illustrated the starboard view. He made sure no one could hear them. "Follow me."

He led them deep into the bowels of the ship, into the weapons hold. "They're really not taking any chances. Look at this," he gestured to a small compartment. Etched on a half-meter thick window was TO BE OPENED ONLY BY PERSONNEL AUTHORIZED ACCESS TO CNWDI MATERIAL. Beyond the marking was a strange ring of conical devices. "This is a nuclear warhead."

"Just one?" Pryor asked. "It looks like a bunch of 'em daisy chained together."

"It is. Nine nuclear warheads acting as one giant one. This is a NOVA. A planet-killer."

"Good God."

Dufraine, the guy that was always cool under pressure, the guy that loved to blow stuff up, took a deep breath and blinked a few times. "Good God indeed, my friends."

"They thought of everything alright," Banga speculated.

"I sure as hell don't want to use this thing."

"So what else do we have that doesn't involve mass destruction on a

planetary scale," Pryor joked.

"We have a single gauss cannon mounted under the belly. We have a few heat-seeking missiles, standard batch of space mines, and twin fifty millimeter chain gunsâ€¦nice lineup," he finished with a subtle thrill trailing his voice.

"Hey I know you're the subject matter expert and all, so what's a gauss cannon?" asked Brahm.

"It's a conventional roundâ€¦non-nuclear. Giant magnetic coils wound on both sides of a tube propel a large and dense, metal slug towards a target at hypersonic velocity. Effectively, it pummels the ever-living crap out of it."

"Sounds brutish."

"It is," Dufraine replied with a devious smile.

"Alright," said Banga. "Let's see what Selonke has to say about the ship's navigation."

They all made their way back to the head of the ship and met First Lieutenant Jeff Selonke at the NAV terminal. "Like what you see, Jeff?" asked Banga.

"Sure do. I've got the whole damn galaxy mapped. Well, not really, but you get the idea. I can plot you a course to anywhere in under a second."

"Well, from the sound of it, we'll need that if we encounter some unfriendlies."

Selonke hung his head and a spell of silence overtook the cockpit.

"â€¦But that's not going to happen," Banga coaxed. "Hereâ€¦let's check on Holmes and then maybe we can get this flight over withâ€¦get some shore leave at Harvest."

"Amen to \_that\_," shouted Brahm.

Second Lieutenant Holmes was already on his way up to the cockpit and approached the crew. "Wow."

"What do you have there, Holmes."

"I've got the targeting resolutions of a longsword. If we run into trouble, they're as good as dead. This thing is a flying tank."

Banga took an explosive breath. "Alright, boys, they've pulled out all the stops for us. Now does anyone not want to go?" he finished with a steadfast smile.

### 3. Deployment

**\*\*Chapter 3 â€" Deployment\*\***

**\*\*Deployment +00 hours:03 minutes:24 seconds (First Lieutenant Banga Mission Clock)/\*\***

**\*\*CMA \_Argo\_ in slipstream spaceâ€”en route to Harvest System\*\***

The stars in front smeared into blur and pulled themselves apart until there was nothing but a scintillating, heavenly glow. The fore view quantum-shifted into blue and the anomalous bubble engulfed the shipâ€”swallowed it whole. The bubble collapsed. The ship was gone.

Vanished from the space-time continuumâ€”

â€”into the ethereal field of slip space.

Way back in the twenty-third century, the scientists Shaw and Fujikawa developed the translight engine. It saved Earth from overpopulation, allowed colonists to spread throughout the galaxy, and brought mankind closer together. It also yanked him apart. Faster-than-light travel enabled Banga, his crew, and the like to run bombing missions on rebel bases.

Even with all these new worlds and new adventures, there was still war. \_Where the hell did Humanity go wrongâ€”again?\_

Yep. FTL got you places alright.

The only thing Banga and his crew were getting closer to was an unknown end.

Out the view port was the abyss of an alternate dimension, somehow blacker than space, and equally lonely.

Streaming along at more than 186,000 miles per second, the crew was looking at a week-long journey. It was really impossible to tell the exact velocity of the vessel as no experiment in slip stream was ever accurate. Telemetry was always inconsistent or corrupted from electromagnetic phenomena.

Moreover, it was theorized that there were eddies or currents within slipstream, which generally gave a five to ten percent variance in transit times. You never knew exactly where you were. Only two things were certain in Shaw-Fujikawa space: Your origin; your destinationâ€”and even that could vary slightly.

In theory, you could very well be passing through a planet, a star, even a black hole without knowing it. Anything could have been the source of interference when traveling in this realm, which made navigational plotting that much more important in slip space travel. If your NAV database was not up to date or your calculations were off, there was no telling what your fate could be. You might end your slip space journey inside a supernova if you weren't careful.

At any rate though, the \_Argo\_ was surely headed to Harvest.

After the jump into slip space, Brad left the systems on auto and stepped out of the cockpit. He walked past priceless equipment, ducked through short bulkheads, and weaved around tight corners. The innards of this vessel were confining. The surfaces were anything but hospitable. Hard and unforgiving is what they were. The honeycombed,

Titanium-A framework of the \_Argo\_ was rigid and cold. The deck plates were a thin, ferric materialâ€”electro-magnetizedâ€”enabling the crew's gravity boots to stabilize their proceedings. The walls were alive and crawling with electrical conduits, tightly-bundled fiber optics, and mazes of high-pressure lines. There was no panache to the \_Argo\_, just mechanized efficiency.

After what seemed like a session of calisthenics, he found himself in the one place he wanted to be before his ice nap: The galley. A hot meal was in order.

He definitely wasn't looking forward to cryo-sleep. No one ever did.

Sergeant Pryor was already there unpacking rations with Lieutenant Holmes watching in a nearby dining chair.

Pryor was the typical airborne crew chief: Always with a plate full of work. And he loved it. To be gainfully employed was his pastime. Pryor was one of those 'seasoned NCOs'. He liked the military. He could've retired by now, but it was his life. His failed marriages were a bitter proof to that. Life on the go doesn't supplement relationships very well. There was definitely no regret in his eyes though. He didn't mind having a lady friend now and then, but his place was in the CMAâ€”for as long as he could remember.

He was taller than your average man, but nothing about him was very distinct, except his full head of light-grey hair. A matching, husky mustache within regs was his defining trait, aside from his love for the military lifestyle of course. He was generally laid back, very keen on his job, and very down to earth. Basically, he was an easy-going, work-a-holic.

Holmes was your typical academy gradâ€”blue to the coreâ€”lean, fit, and ready for anything. He still had that Basic Training buzz cutâ€”a shallow mat of jet black hair. His uniformâ€”utility or service dressâ€”was always the sharpest of the bunch, with crisp creases on the sleeves. Mostly, Holmes was rigid and formal, but found himself getting along well with the crew ever since they scooped him up out of training a few operations back. His superb job knowledge on starship defense weaponry won Banga and the others over well. He was just the man for their team.

But most importantly, Holmes had what Brad held in high regard...what Brad needed from \_all\_ his men: Their military bearing. When first names became \_sir\_ and smiles turned into game faces.

The two were apparently well into a conversation so Brad decided to let them be and tried finding other food.

"So what," Holmes asked Pryor. "You just always know who you're dealing with? You can keep eye contact and never look at rank?"

"When you're in as long as me you can just kind of smell your own, you know?"

"Well, practice makes perfect, my Daddy always said."

"That's a good analogy."

"Thanks."

Brad couldn't help but hear them. It was true. After a while, you just knew who was who, even if you had no idea who they were. Maybe it was the way they carried themselves, how fast they walked, the quality of personal possessions they owned, the way they talked. Many things told a story about someone. You just needed a practiced eye, that's all.

Time in is all that mattered.

But Brad felt like he had too much time in. Too much of it wasted. The last few years were just hectic and only benefited the government. A drop here, a drop there. Catching a wink of shuteye just to get ready for another mission, or spending just enough time in a far away city to refuel or rearm. He'd been everywhere and back in a minute, it seemed. Reach, Earth, Mars, Jericho, Eridanus, Lambda Serpentis, Biko, Mamore, Harmony...The days melded into one and the years became simply a blur. All this travel and business; accomplishing everything, yet attaining nothing. He was glad he was so shortâ€"only one year.

No more flying, no more missions, no more time spent away from what mattered the most. After this mission it was smooth sailing, which made him realize just how serious the mission was. He had to play it perfectâ€"no screw ups. He would keep a strict watch from here on out. He didn't like being the 'military guy' to his crew, but this time, it'd be for their own good. After all, they had families tooâ€"people that were waiting on them; that loved them.

"Heads-up, fellas," Banga addressed the two in the galley. "Commander's call in the cryo chamber in fifteen. I have some things I need to go over with everyone."

"Roger that, boss," said Pryor. "I'll tell the others." He reached over to a wall-mounted intercom. "Drop your socks and grab your\_â€"

"Ahem," Holmes uttered.

"Meeting at cryo in fifteen!" he finished with a nonchalant smirk.

After their meal, the three made their way to the cryo-stasis chamber. The room definitely had the largest ceiling in the ship besides the engine room. To put it in practical terms, it was probably to ease the vertigo of waking up. Mild claustrophobia was not uncommon before, during, or after cryostasis. People just needed their space sometimes.

A functional aspect of the high ceiling was that these pods were mounted on rails. In the event of a ship emergency such as fire or hull breach, the pods were jettisoned into space, providing enough life support until a reasonable search and rescue op could be performed.

Everyone was gathered near Banga's command tube and waiting for his instruction.

Dufraine, with his typical strand of milkweed hanging out of his mouth, stood perfectly at ease, leaning up against Brad's cryotube. He only let it hang there when he was nervous. Brad picked up on that. But nervous he rarely was. He usually just chewed on it or nursed the sweet nectar from inside of it. Dufraine was cool and calmâ€”a fitting personality to say the least for a demolitions expert. He started his career on a UXO team (Unexploded Ordinance). He was the guy that defused live bombs for a paycheck. Insaneâ€”orâ€”insanely calm. He was slightly shorter than your average man with ratty, brown hairâ€”barely within regs, and opaque-black eyes that knew your life story but gave nothing away in return. He had small and dexterous hands despite his stocky build. Those ten, nimble digits saved God knows how many lives from high-order detonation.

Brahm was usually just as calm as Dufraine, but twice as arrogant. He was your typical communications guruâ€”the know-it-all wise guy. He was of average height, the most muscled of the group, and his hair was dark and cropped short. He always gloated, and had quite the way with the ladies.

As usual, Selonke was right by Banga's side. He was a tall man, wore glasses, had curly-brown hair, and was happily married with children. His job was congruent to his moral fiberâ€”the navigatorâ€”always faithful and true. He always got them through the worst of things.

These men in front of Banga were his lifeline. The fact that they were in airborne status alone meant they were the best of the best; trained for missions like this. But more: They were his best friends. Most people go through life with only one, or none. He had five. The fact that they could remain such good friends and still do the job they did, only meant they would go places. How ironic it was now.

"Alright," Banga started. "We just need to go over a few things and be prepared for what might happen." He drew a deep breath. "Dufraine, how's our armament?"

"A-okay, sir. Full inventory and all fail safes are green."

"Excellent. Selonke?"

"Course is true. We should arrive in about one hundred forty-four standard hours, give or take about fourteen."

"Good. Pryor?"

"Everything is ship-shape. I could let her run herself."

"Let's not get that complacent, shall we? Holmes, how are you with the weapons?"

"Good, sir. No problems there. We're good to go."

"Very good. Brahm, we need to go over first contact scenariosâ€”friendly and hostile. Do you have any?"

"That's a good question. I can't be sure."

"Why?"

"Well," he opened with an awkward smile and chose his words carefully, "There is that language barrier."

"Can you send a greeting message? Like 'welcome stranger\_?'"

"Can't be sure," Brahm answered as diplomatically as possible.

"Can you try at least?"

"I can always try," he replied with a customary smile, "but I don't think High Command intended for us to talk to these aliens. It's actually unlikely they'll respond or even be able to hear our transmission. When we," he said with his hands pointing back and forth to everyone, "talk to each otherâ€¦UNSC shipsâ€¦we already know what frequencies to use and what encryption to generate, so on and so forth. There's also a dozen other possible factors in play like polarization techniques, phase shifting, modulation, multiplexing, encoding, the size of the digital word, companding methods and PCM techniques, you get the idea. The variables are practically limitless."

"Hey, what about a purely analog signal?" asked Dufraine. "Can't you do one of those?"

"Say what? Purely \_analog\_? All waves, when they are sent, \_are\_ analog. It's just that inside the analog carrier wave is an embedded signal with who knows what inside it. That's why FLEETCOM and DISA periodically send out heavily-encrypted messages on the REDNET containing the latest ciphers and configurations to all comm. officers. Everyone stays updated."

"Okay, but I'm talking about the simplest form of it, with none of the fancy mumbo-jumbo you just said. Just one signal, nothing else, withâ€¦.you knowâ€¦.a simple hello, or maybe some mathematical language that equates to hello. I saw it in an old movie once."

"That's kinda hard to generate being that we always radiate with modulated and encoded signals. The only way to send a simplex wave like that would be to use no modulation and it would have to be an extremely low-frequency signal, like anywhere from three hundred to thirty-four hundred hertz or what we call 'voice frequency'."

"So, do that."

"Do you realize the \_size\_ our antenna would have to be?" he disputed. "Not only that, but we'd have to be awfully close to their ship to even send an unmodulated transmission to them because it would require a tremendous amount of power to send it. If we got that close, they might think our intentions are hostile. So, to make this happen I'd also have to bypass a lot of automated security measures and change some parameters in the equipment, but let me askâ€¦why?"

"Well," Dufraine conjectured, "It's the easiest way for them to understand, right? It could be done, right?"

"\_Yeah\_â€|" Brahm said with apprehension. "â€|but again, there's still a one-in-a-million chance they could hear it, let alone understand it. For all we know, they could very well be communicating with gamma rays or something. Their technology could be light-years ahead of ours...see what I'm sayin'? Plus, they'd have to have one hell of a band pass filter to be able to hear every frequency out there. \_That\_, and I personally don't want to send a purely analog message," he said folding his arms and leaning back.

"Why don't you want to?" asked Banga.

"â€|'Cause it would make us look stupid."

"Make us lookâ€|stupid?"

"How would you feel if you were the representative of your race and the aliens looked down on you right from the get-go?"

"Why would they think we're stupid, because it's an unencrypted signal? This is one of those first contact scenarios so why would we encrypt anyways?"

"No, not for encryption. I'm not even \_saying\_ we encrypt. Justâ€|\_you know\_â€|make it a little challenging for them. Sort of make us look good."

The rest of the squad stared off in divergence, dubious. Banga intervened and broke the silence. "Let's just do analog."

"I'm telling you, we'll look like shit bricks. Picture it this way: There's a very smart man in front of you and you're trying to talk to him, but you speak the same language. Wouldn't you look very stupid if you sounded out every syllable to a guy with a doctorate?" Brahm stood taller and cupped his hands around his mouth for emphasis. "It'd be like us saying 'Hey! We're still living in the stone age!'"

"\_Alright\_," instructed Banga. "I'm in charge. We'll do it your way and if that doesn't work, you'll go with the analog. Is that understood?"

"Yes sir," Brahm tactfully complied.

Banga stormed over to his tube, manually opened the door, and took a seat inside, mumbling something to himself while Brahm laughed under his breath. "I swear I can't believe the shit we argue over sometimes."

Master Sergeant Pryor strode up to Brahm after the brief scuffle was over. "So how long before we can talk to these guys?"

"Well, quite a while I suppose. First, we're sending an unmodulated, analog signal. Depending on what frequency works best out here, I'll probably have to construct a new antenna from scratch. Then, I'll have to alter the programming in the MODEM's firmware, as well as reprogram the base band equipment. That'll take a while. Then, I'm gonna have to override several warranteed filters and voltage-controlled oscillators. Maybe that'll land me an article fifteen. I'll also have to dump the keys in all the crypto gear. This

is probably in one ear and out the other for ya but believe me, it sucks, and all just for a message that won't even work."

"Heh, don't sweat it man. Today, we run the military," he said indifferently and walked off.

"Yeahâ€" Brahms murmured rebelliously. He saw Pryor move back into the avionics bay and shut the hatch behind him. "â€"Whatever you say."

Banga came out from his tube and approached Brahms's side. "Hey man, I didn't mean to get short with you, John. Just work on that comm. setup in case we need it. No worries."

"Sure thing, boss. No worries."

"Do you think you can have it done before cryo?"

"Yeah, no problem."

"Alright. I'll see you on the flipside then."

#### 4. Enter Harvest

**\*\*Chapter 4 â€" Enter Harvest\*\***

**\*\*Deployment +170 Hours:00 Minutes:01 Seconds (First Lieutenant Banga Mission Clock)/\*\***

**\*\*CMA Argo exiting slipstream spaceâ€"arrival at Harvest\*\***

Revived; Stimulated...Barely. Cold and unnaturally dry.

Miniature ice crystals were pent up around the edges of Brad's waking vision, slowly retracting towards the periphery, and then evaporating. He could feel his extremities. His sight was on-off-on-off. Eyelids flickered and cheek muscles quivered. Now he was awakeâ€"thawed out so to speak. He wiggled his joints a few times to reacquaint with the sensation and felt the blood rush once again.

A transparent wall was heaved upward by servo motors, revealing the cryostasis deck in front of him. He laid there at ease, knowing his weakness as wisps of fog hung stagnant in the air around him. After a few minutes he clumsily pushed himself up and out of his cryotube, dragging some of the mist with him. He took a look around as if something might have changed while he was in dreamland. Nothing had. Nothing but green LEDs on all the monitorsâ€"heart rate, respiratory, alpha patternsâ€"all good. No setbacks.

He proceeded to supervise the automated wake up sequences for his crew and immediately sensed something was wrong. He could feel something bubbling deep inside him, making him lurch forward. He had the wall monitors in sight, but they grew hazy. He tried to approach them with an outstretched arm, accomplished about two steps, and was thrown forward by a sharp gag reflex. He tried not to fall as he doubled over at the waist, coughing until a clear string of fluid stretched to the deck from his open mouth.

No one ever looked forward to this part of cryogenic stasis. The bronchial-surfactant protein complex simultaneously cleaned and infused vital nutrients into the digestive and respiratory tract during prolonged periods of hibernation.

He tried to take his first full breath in one week as he stood hunched over, watching the mucus-like colloid seep into the deck.

He got dressed, wiped up the mess, and prepared a high-protein meal and once ready, strode to the command deck. He stepped down ladders, crawled through tight hatches, and rounded sharp corners. Carbon-dioxide scrubbers, temperature rheostats, and high-voltage power supplies hummed and submersed the hull in a well of radiating loneliness.

He sat down and took a deep breath, taking a moment aside and made a conscious effort to feel his extremities again. They felt good, but still sluggish. They always did after cryosleep. When the body was cooled to these absolute temperatures, the nerve endings receded further into the body in accordance with basic laws of nature—"cool equals condense and hot equals expanse. Lately, his nerves were on edge—no pun intended. So it felt good to move around and experience a dulled perception of sensation.

He sat down, logged in to the ship's onboard computer, and recalled his electronic portfolio—his mission and its objectives. He bent his head lower so an optical receiver could scan his retinal signature. Pulse lasers picked up tiny blood vessels behind his retina and sent an equivalent binary-encoded serial bit stream to the security buffer. Once his true identity was confirmed, a safe was unlocked. He opened the miniature vault under the console and pulled from it a translucent tabulate with strange markings. As instructed, he set the material atop an optical character scanner. He let the electronics take over and looked up and out the front view port. The black void of slipspace was gone, as he anticipated. A splash of stars were thrown about the black velvet of space, glittering and twinkling with business. They were his only companions for the moment.

Dufraine was apparently the next to be revived.

"Hey, Brad," he greeted. "Sleep good?"

"Sleep was fine. It's the waking up part I'm still having trouble with."

"Got that right, man." He eased his stance and leaned up against the side bulkhead, placing a bent arm over his head to catch his weight while his hips relaxed. "What's going on here?"

"Just making preparations for the final jump."

"Final jump? You mean we're not at Harvest yet?"

"No. I've been instructed to stop at a pre-determined distance from Harvest, wake the crew, then make the final jump."

"Why?"

"I don't ask. I just follow. But my guess would be so that we don't jump right into range of Harvest and \_then \_wake up."

"That's a good take on it. Cautious. So we don't wake up face to face with some aliens."

"BINGO."

"But why not send a battle group under some gung-ho captain out here. I still can't figure out...why us?"

"Think about it from the big picture, from HighComm's picture. Better to send a single scout crew instead of a battle group, right? Better to lose one small ship and one small crew rather than half a fleet, huh?"

"Wow. I never thought of it like that before. You have a military mind."

"Don't say that. I'm trying to avoid anything military at all costs, or at least have \_been \_trying to. Now this."

"Eh, I guess I'm just better thinking about details."

"You sure are and that's where we need you."

"So why would \_anyone \_want to wipe out Harvest. It's not a military zone. It's one of those 'prospect' colonies. The more I think about it, the less likely these so-called aliens are hostile."

"Okay then, why don't you tell the higher-ups that? I'm sure they'd care what you would have to say in the matter." He turned from Dufraine and placed his attention back to the equipment.

As usual, nothing much fazed Dufraine. "So what are we waiting for? HighComm's blessing?"

"We're waiting on Selonke to confirm the coordinates."

"Speak of the devil."

"I'm gonna hunt down the man who invented that wake up juice," grunted Selonke as he strode into the cockpit.

Dufraine moved out of his way. "Sleep good too?"

"Yeah right. Okay then, let's do it," Selonke said as he crashed down into the navigator's chair. "Loading in coordinates. Authenticatingâ€¦processed. We're good. We can make the jump, Brad."

"Shortly. I want everyone here for a briefing first."

Dufraine spoke into the wall-mounted intercom and his voice resonated through the ship. "\_Everyone, to the bridge."\_

While the rest of the crew was busy shaking off the lethargy of deep sleep, Brad reflected once more before it was time to hit the grindstone. He bent his head lower to the console and he thought about his last words with his wife. No...

Last words wasn't the right thing to say. He would surely see her again, no matter what happened. He'd be there for her. He remembered how he'd sometimes just lay in bed with her, before his career took off as a pilot, just doing...nothing. Things were simpler then and they lived a life without any doubt. What happened to those days? He had to relive them again. He had to get through this deployment. Then he thought of his crew. They had to be going through the same thing, but they sure as hell didn't show it...just like him.

"Sir, they're all here," Dufraine whispered over Banga's shoulder.

Banga swiveled in his chair to face the men.

"This is it. One final jump and we're in Harvest. Anyone have anything to say?"

After a brief pause, "Just wanna say that it's been a great ten years," Selonke started. "We've been through a lot, you know. We've had some pretty scary times, but we've always made it home. This last ten years has been likeâ€¦playing with fire and not getting burned. If we can make it through ten years of bombing, we can get through this."

A kind of silent understanding drifted among them.

Pryor shifted his stance. "If there's any crew out there for this, it's us. That's why we're here; because they know we can pull through, whatever the outcome. Hell," he said as he slapped a hand against a bulkhead. "This baby alone will get us through."

"Anyone else?"

Everyone stood at a finagled parade rest with their hands clasped behind their backs. Brahm stared back with nothing in his eyes. Holmes stood firmly in place, simply ready to do the job. Pryor and Selonke already spoke their peace, and Dufraine was just as casual as ever with that same old twig in his mouth.

There was nothing more to be said, really. They knew each other well. They were ready and they each held in their own apprehensions under the surface.

"No matter what happens out there, we're a team. We'll pull through. For this mission. For the CMA. For our families."

Banga spun back around in his chair to face the cockpit. "Countdown to normal space: T minus fifteen seconds. Everyone to your stations," he ordered.

Banga read the countdown. :10

He prayed everything would be alrightâ€¦just a mix-up. :09

Not for just the crew and their families. :07

There was much more at stake. :06

The fate of all Humanity. :01

:00

"Alright, Selonke," Brad began, "Get hardware and software systems ready to transition to atmospheric parameters for the moment we're ready to descend. I want a seamless transition." Brad then swiveled his chair to give himself a straight look at his co-pilot and navigator. "And make sure it's a covert trajectory."

He swiveled back.

"Well, we're here." Selonke told him.

But Brad didn't reply. Selonke glanced at him. The mission commander just stared ahead.

"We'll get through this quick, Brad. Don't worry."

Selonke then spoke into the ship's internal comm.. "\_Everyone: We've arrived at Harvest.\_" He looked up through the view port, saw Harvest. It didn't look much like the Harvest they saw in MISSION PLANNING back at Reach. It must be some heavy solar wind distorting the view or something. He looked back down at his equipment and threw on his glasses. "Running exit diagnostics for slip space drives. Sending exit coordinates back to Reach"

He stopped himself short and realized what he just saw"what Brad was staring at.

His heart skipped a beat and adrenaline raced through his cold blood. His eyes widened. He stared at Harvest"looked to Brad"back to Harvest.

"Oh. My. God."

## 5. Harvest is Gone

**\*\*Chapter 5 " Harvest is Gone\*\***

**\*\*Deployment +170 Hours:20 Minutes:21 Seconds (First Lieutenant Banga Mission Clock)\*\***

**\*\*CMA \_Argo\_, Harvest Colony\*\***

"This isn't right. Something's happened. Something's wrong," Selonke spoke absentmindedly. He tried to frantically locate an explanation by going over his equipment. He ran every diagnostic tool he could think of. But there was no use. For weeks prior to this mission, these were the preset coordinates in interstellar space.

160,000 kilometers directly ahead was a globe of shiny glass, pockmarked with fire and brimstone. Selonke hung his head.

Banga snapped out of his trance"spurred into action and queued the intercom. "\_Brahm, get me spectroscopic analysis ninety seconds ago!" He looked to his right at Selonke. "Jeff, verify our coordinates, now. Check for procession and drift. Run diagnostics on \_all \_systems."

"\_Weapon systems online and remaining on standby, sir,\_" Lieutenant Holmes said. "\_Will scan for bogies.\_"

"\_Slipspace drives hot and ready in case we need to fly,\_" Pryor added from the reactor room.

"Selonke, get us closer to that planet. \_Brahm, where's my analysis?"\_

"\_Sir, it's all silicon-dioxide. Few other trace elements, but it's all glass.\_"\_

"\_Glass?"\_

"\_Yes sirâ€"glass.\_"\_

"Jesus. Selonke, are the coordinates right?"

"They're fine, sir."

"Double check them!"

"\_Triple\_-checked, sir. This is itâ€|This is Harvest."

"Harvest is gone," Banga whispered. He stared again at the fireball of shiny glass. It pulsated with hell, alive, crawling. The blues and greens and whites that he yearned for were erased. The seas boiled away, the forests were singed past regeneration, and the atmosphere was scorched into oblivion. And the people...

Brad closed his eyes.

"\_New contact! Bearing: Dead ahead,\_" \_Brahm announced.\_ "Unknown class. Initiating spectro-analysis.\_"\_

"\_Brahm\_, \_go all stealth, quick quiet.\_" Banga ordered.

"\_Ayeâ€|All stealth, quick quiet.\_"\_

The internal lights dimmed to a forewarning red. The engine output plunged to zero, and all ancillary systems went to stand-by. And whatever sort of secrets the Prowler Corporation planted in the \_Argo\_, \_went to work as well.

"What the hellâ€|is \_that\_?" Banga inquired, squinting through the view port.

"Forward cameras online; max zoom," Selonke stated.  
"Focusingâ€|it'sâ€|" he declared with a hiss "...\_them. \_It's the aliens."

Contrasting against the fiery northern pole of Harvest was a strange oval-shaped vesselâ€"mostly blue with a purplish tinge accentuated by the faint glow of its aft-facing propulsion. It looked no bigger than a river salmon from where the \_Argo\_ was. Underestimating the alien ship was dangerous, though. It could easily destroy them if indeed it was responsible for the magnitude of destruction on display. And indeed, it could probably see them if they could see it.

"All stop, Selonke," Banga ordered. "\_Brahm, do you have an answer

for me?\_"

"\_Analysis inconclusive. Molecular absorption does not match up with anything in the database. Some of the atomic particle counts don't even match up with the table!\_"

"What's it doing?" Banga asked Selonke.

"It's in geostationary orbit."

"Headed which way?"

"Away from us."

"Let me know as soon as there's a ball of glass between us and them. We're getting the hell out of here."

"Roger that, sir."

"We've seen all we needed to see," he murmured.

"\_Sir\_" Brahm shouted.

"\_What\_"

"\_I'm receiving a message! \_It's from them! \_They must've seen us exit slipspace.\_"

"\_Shunt it to the intercom.\_"

"\_Done\_."

A deep, throaty voice shook the \_Argo\_...

\_You brought nothing to this world, and we will ensure you bring nothing out\_.

Every hair on Brad stood up. The sound was like a subdued roar from an imaginary demon, but what was more frightening was that the crew could understand it.

"\_Jeez!" \_Banga said involuntarily. A bead of sweat trickled down his temples. "Selonke, get on our exit solution, now!"

\_Your very existence is an affront to the Gods!\_

There was no way the crew could fathom what the message meant, but it was clearly hostile.

"Time to leave, Jeff! Exit solution!!"

\_Our conviction is like an arrow already in flight. Your life will only last until it reaches you.\_

"\_Aspect change," \_Brahm cautioned with anxiety creeping in. "â€|They're coming after us!" \_he shouted. "\_Heading straight for us!!!!!!!"\_

"I'm not going to make it in time!" Selonke shouted. "I've plotted a course to the asteroid field. Take it!"

Banga immediately executed the route. "Damn it! This better buy us time!"

6. Go!

**\*\*Chapter 6 "Go!"\*\***

**\*\*Deployment +170 Hours:23 Minutes:07 Seconds (First Lieutenant Banga Mission Clock)\*\***

**\*\*CMA \_Argo\_, Harvest Colony\*\***

"Damn it! This better buy us time!"

"It will. I've calculated it."

"Just like you calculated the course back home?"

Jeff shot Brad a heated glance from the NAV chair, but Brad's was far more livid. Maybe Brad could smooth things over as he always did, but the time didn't exist for it right now.

"\_Massive heat bloom to six' o'clock\_ some kind of thermal energy weapon," \_Brahm broadcasted over the comm. \_"Deploying flare\_."

"Will we make the asteroid field, Jeff?"

"Yes. I'm positive we will."

"You'd better be right."

"\_Weapon's velocity is overtaking the Argo's,"\_ Brahm shouted. "\_Recommend evasive maneuvers\_."

"Prepare emergency dorsal thrusters," Banga ordered Selonke. "Purge on my mark."

"\_Weapon impact in twenty seconds!"\_

"Jeff, how long until we reach the asteroid field?"

He looked over with an obvious uneasiness. "Eighteen seconds."

Brad looked away and thought for a few heartbeats. "Sounding collision alarm. \_All hands: Brace for impact!"\_

Maybe, just maybe, they could make it to the asteroid belt in time to evade the alien torpedo. And maybe, it wouldn't shatter some asteroids into a million other torpedoes.

Brad looked at the countdown timer :10

"\_It\_ \_didn't take the flares. It's still coming.\_"

Brad tried to pay attention to the torpedo gaining on them from the rear, the asteroids looming ahead, and the frantic announcements over the PA.

"\_Holmes, target all asteroids in our envelope with the auto cannons. \_Selonke, dodge the larger ones," Brad begged with widened eyes.

Selonke had never seen Brad so scared and desperate. In fact...this was the only time Brad ever was scared. It made him concentrate harder than ever before. Because Brad was the closest friend he ever had and here he was, about to watch it all disappear.

:05

Large objects were suddenly visible in front, barely contrasted against the blackness of space like reapers in the dark. Banga tensed in his chair as they seemed to strike out to the Prow of the \_Argo\_. "\_This is gonna be real close!"\_

:00

Asteroids in front were blasted apart from the twin 50mm guns, Holmes and the computer targeting algorithms turning them into soaring pebbles. The \_Argo\_ sailed through it all, a cloud with thousands of tiny rock fragments showering it in a furious barrage. They dimpled and pierced the outer hull, turning it into Swiss cheese. This could actually work, but the real threat was lurking behind. Banga could feel shockwaves penetrate the hull as muffled explosions sounded to the stern.

"Aft cameras!"

The aft view snapped on screen. It was a ruby-red teardrop of molten plasma racing behind him, with static electricity crackling around its edges, and still on target. It looked like a molded, crimson solar flare. It rushed in pursuit, tackling entire asteroids in the \_Argo's\_ wake as the ship jerked and oscillated left to right. It melted through the rocks like a hot knife through butter. It wasn't slowing down.

"Whoa!!! Sir!!!"

Banga yanked his eyes from the console displaying the rear view and looked squarely into the view port. The stars ahead were gone. A massive asteroid blotted out the fore view.

"Purge! Purge! Purge!"

Selonke slammed the control. The \_Argo\_ shuddered and jolted downwards with furious force. Banga flew upwards with his seat restraints straining him back into the seated position. He grunted against the inertia pushing him up into his restraint harness as the electronic systems surged out from the explosive shockwave. "Gi-vvve. Hhhhh-Me. Fffffff. Cmmmmras."

The aft view refreshed itself and the asteroid they nearly missed was completely goneâ€"vaporized. Nothing occupied the space where the energy projectile just was.

The \_Argo's\_ trajectory stabilized. The titanium-A framework and carbon fiber panels settled to their original positions and groaned as the stresses on them resigned.

"All stop!"

"Emergency thrusters depleted. We have reserves," Selonke mustered out of breath.

Brad rubbed a hand over his sore chest. The restraint harness had dug hard into his flight suit and he could feel a tingling all across his chest where the material ground down his skin. "Are we still in the debris field?"

"Affirmative, we should be able to hide here long enough to get a jump back to the Epsilon Eridani system."

"Good. \_Brahm, monitor for that ship and never stop. Pryor, work on any maintenance issue that needs attending, and Holmes, give me status on ammunition.\_"

"\_Fifty percent auto cannon ammo.\_"

"\_Sealing outer bulkheads,\_ " Pryor announced. "\_Hull breaches in C deck, sections one through three\_. \_I don't think the debris hit anything vital though, but long-range communications are down.\_"

"\_Sir, I'm getting nothing out there. I think it's turned back,\_ " the comm. officer confirmed.\_ "I'll keep monitoring and I'll get on long-range comm. in the meantime.\_"

"\_Everyone: I want damage reports around the clock until Selonke can get us out of here.\_"

## 7. A Welcome Voice

**\*\*Chapter 7 â€" A Welcome Voice\*\***

**\*\*Deployment +170 Hours:26 Minutes:07 Seconds (First Lieutenant Banga Mission Clock)/\*\***

**\*\*CMA \_Argo\_, Harvest Colony, nearby asteroid field\*\***

Brad just finished up getting a report from Pryor about a damaged hydraulic line and was coming back to the cockpit. Before he entered, he saw Jeff at his NAV terminal, adjacent to the pilot's seat. He was hunched forward, as if concentrating hard on something in front, only it wasn't his equipment. He was motionless, deep in thought, and actually sort of grimacing inward. Brad resumed his trek back into the cockpit.

"Hey...you alright?"

"I think so," Jeff replied. "I really...really messed up, but I'll be alright."

"Don't think too hard about it."

It was such an easy thing to say, but to be in the proverbial hotseat with so much expectation...any navigator would have his hands full. Jeff's performance in the face of hostile aliens was satisfying to

say the least. Sure, they weren't home but they were safe, for now.

"I'll be in the engine room if you need me, okay?"

Banga was just about to leave...

"Brad," Selonke beckoned from the NAV chair.

"What's up?" Brad said as he turned around.

"You're not going to like this."

"Just give it to me straight—and I'm sorry I lashed out at you back there."

"We have to clear the asteroid field before we jump. There's just not enough room in here."

"There's nothing more we can do?"

"Yeah." He swallowed hard.

Brad breathed deep and let out explosively and offered a sympathetic smile. "Well, it'll draw us out into the open, but it's better than nothing."

"No—Brad—that's only the half of it. If we jump in the open, they'll be able to detect it for one, but they'll also be able to decipher our heading—"back to Reach."

Banga slapped an open palm against his forehead. "What to do? What to do?" he whispered.

He looked out the view port once again, maybe to find a muse in the stars surrounding them or some source of beauty and inspiration. But the only thing drawing in his gaze was the massive fireball of Harvest. The sight was so blasphemous yet so alluring, like man's primeval attraction to flame. According to the Centennial CMA Census, there were 3 million citizens living here at the time these aliens showed up. Towns, cities, metropolii. Farmers, doctors, engineers. Wives, husbands, children, animals. Green and blue and life. All gone in a flash. It could've been Brad and his family living there. Pryor, Selonke, Brahm...\_anyone. \_Brad imagined what the heat would feel like if there wasn't this hull of titanium between him and the blazing ghost-planet. He could feel his blood warm.

He was losing sight now, becoming unnerved as he dwelled on this new horror. The implications were huge. An entire colony just—gone. What next?

But he couldn't let his mind roam. This was still a mission. It was still salvageable. He took his mind off the strategic picture so he could focus on the tactical.

He took a look around the cockpit. There had to be more options. There always were, no matter how bleak the situation. Sometimes the options available are never seen because it involves collateral damage, or you're simply thinking in the wrong frame of reference—

"Frame of reference!" Brad shot up and started pacing.

"\_What?\_" Selonke asked.

Brad reared up to the overhead console and poked the intercom switch.  
"\_Brahm, is that ship still in orbit?\_"

"\_I'm pretty sure. Want me to check?\_"

"\_Absolutely. Use the drones.\_"

"\_Sending out the drones.\_"

Every ship in the CMA fleet had Clarion Spy Drones in its inventory. They were small, cheap, and a priceless asset in any situation. Powered by miniscule propulsion systems, they were virtually undetectable unless the enemy vessel devoted its entire sensory array to a single point in space. They laid claim to a variety of ship-class EM detectors. They could take in visible light or any other slice of the electromagnetic spectrum. They were the ideal eavesdroppers in a hard-vacuum.

"\_Give me two on either side of that planet. I want to know the instant it disappears from our view,\_" Banga commanded.

"\_ETA to orbital positions is ten minutes.\_"

"\_Very good. \_We're still getting out of here, Jeff. Plot that course. \_Everyone, give me status on damage control.\_"

Before anyone could comply, something odd happened.

"\_Sir!\_" Brahm shouted. "\_Single ping off to starboardâ€¦in the debris field with us!\_"

"\_Holmes, full readiness!\_ Selonke, how's that solution?"

"I don't know. There's too much magnetic interference from the asteroids."

"Can't you just do a jump based on our trajectory when we arrived in-system?"

"We've moved since then. It has to be \_precise. \_Give it time."

"We don't have it! \_Brahm, where is it now? We're gonna make ready to blast it with everything we've got!\_"

"\_Wait!\_" Brahm screamed. "\_Hold on! I'm getting another ping, but it's CMA!\_"

"\_What?\_"

"\_Definitely CMA! It's on an E-band IFF transponder!\_"

Selonke's eyes met Banga's from the NAV chair.  
"Identification-Friend-or-Foe," Selonke whispered.

Banga reached back to the intercom. "\_Are you picking up anymore

signals, Brahm?\_"

"\_None! We're safe.\_"

"\_Link up with Selonke and bring us closer to that ship.\_"

"\_Aye sir.\_"

The \_Argo \_stealthily slithered its way between asteroids, weaving from rock to rock. Anymore than a fraction of an impulse and they were caught. It was tedious, but oh so neccessary. As they ventured closer to the source of the ping, a CMA vessel was barely visible. The odd, sharp-angled lines of a Chiroptera-class fighter, looking much like an asteroid itself aside from the obvious protrusions of stubby wings and rear stabilizers. It was perfectly hidden. They were the revolutionary stealth ships of their time, all but obsolete now. Banga tried to look for the streamer on its tailfin. All he made out was a single gout of orange-red flame, faintly illuminated by the flame of Harvest at their backs.

"Bring us to within spot-beam communications range, Jeff."

Bagna opened with a ping. He received one back. A dialouge was now open.

"\_This is the CMA Argo. Identify yourself.\_"

A disembodied reply came back. "\_This is the CMA Prometheus. I'm a civilian. Are you here to rescue me?\_"

Brad exchanged a cautious glance with Selonke. A civilian in a fighter craft? "How much time until you get that solution back home, Jeff?"

"Less than a minute."

"\_Brahm, how are those spy drones doing?\_"

"\_Less than a minute, sir.\_"

Banga weighed it out. They could be on their way home to safety in under three minutes, easily. They could warn everyone about what happened here. But now there was a complication. An innocent bystander. He couldn't just leave him here.

"\_Pyror, how long would it take to dock with her?\_"

"\_No more than three minutes.\_"

"\_Hello?\_" a voice came from the \_Prometheus\_.

"\_How many of you are there?\_" Banga asked the civilian.

"\_It's just me. Are you getting me out of here?\_"

"\_Stand by. We're coming to get you out.\_"

**\*\*Chapter 8 " Friend or Foe?"**

**\*\*Deployment +170 Hours:29 Minutes:05 Seconds (First Lieutenant Banga Mission Clock)/\*\***

**\*\*CMA \_Argo\_, Harvest Colony, nearby asteroid field\*\***

A tight vibration complimented by a dense echo signaled Pryor that hard dock was achieved. Now the tricky part.

Almost every CMA vessel had common docking surfaces, but Pryor couldn't be sure about these old Chiroptera-class stealth vessels. He never worked with one before. His knowledge on this vintage breed of fighter craft was limited to his literature on it.

With the assistance of the dorsal cameras, he was able to get in close enough to determine that hard dock was true. He'd have to rely strictly on pressure tests to verify the integrity of soft seal. That meant there was no guarantee that surfaces wouldn't shift or fall out of tolerance during the merger. Just to be safe he was in a vacuum-environment suit and he sealed the room's bulkhead to spare the rest of the \_Argo\_ from possible explosive decompression.

He tensed a little as he read the overhead countdown to soft seal.  
:03

:02

:01

:00 SEAL INTACT///RELEASE WHEN READY

He took in a deep breath and cracked the seal of the \_Argo's\_ dorsal hatch. One foot in front was the \_Prometheus.\_ He banged on the hatch with a tack hammer. It opened and a Human face appeared.

"\_Are you okay?\_" Pryor said through his suit's voice emitter.

"I'm fine, thanks," the man returned. "You sure are a welcomed voice."

"Don't mention it. Is there anything you'd like to take aboard?"

The civilian looked back for a moment through the open hatch. Pryor tried to take a peek at what the man was staring at, but he sensed the shifting bulkiness of Pryor's vac-suit and blocked the view.

"Well c'mon, son. We don't have all day."

The man turned back to Pryor and took a reluctant step into the \_Argo.\_ Once the rescued man was in, Pryor closed the hatch and disrobed from his suit. "C'mon. I'll take you to the bridge. You can meet the man that saved you."

After a short walk, Pryor brought the man to the command deck where everyone else was gathered. Banga's spun around in the command chair. "Welcome aboard the \_Argo\_, sir. How long were you cooped up in that ship?"

"Too long," he replied with an awkward smile. "You have no idea how much I appreciate this. Are we leaving now? I don't think there are anymore survivors."

"Yes. We are leaving. Soon. We have to wait for our friends out there to disappear from view, then yes, we are out of here."

The man let loose and looked around. "So they got the message then?"

Banga looked around at everyone. "What message?"

"The message I sent to Reach."

"You already sent a warning communicuÃ©?"

"Yeah, I sent it as soon as I got hereâ€¦as soon as \_they\_ got here. The Covenant showed up. They immediately went to work on Harvest."

"Slow down, man. Who is the Covenant?"

"\_Them!\_" he said pointing somewhere to the outer hull.

Brahm raised his brow ill-manneredly in the background.

"They call themselves the Covenant?" Brad asked.

"Yes. They said that, right when they arrived."

"What else did they say?"

"A bunch of shit like '\_You are an affront to the Gods'.'\_"

The men of the \_Argo\_ all glanced at one another.

"They said the same stuff to us," said Brad. "But we weren't as lucky as you to get an introduction out of them. Do you know how it is they speak our language?"

"It would seem they've been studying us for some time," the civilian inferred.

"So you warned Reach then?"

"Yeah."

"Well then why the hell did they send us," Banga whispered next to Selonke.

"Probably because it takes a while for the message to get there," Selonke retorted in an even lower whisper. "It took us a week to get here, so the message should be getting there by now, if not already."

"I don't mean to be a stickler, but we really need to get back to Reach." The man pulled something from his pocket. He stepped forward and offered Selonke a slip of paper. "I've got three pseudo-random jumps ready to go. We should proceed to these coordinâ€¦"

"We already have a course mapped out," said Banga.

"Yes, sir. But you realize if they see us jump, they'll follow us to Reach and obliterate it, just like here."

"Relax," said Brahm. "We know the position of the Covenant ship out there. As soon as it disappears from view, we're gone."

"Hmm," the man grunted in internal agreement. "Fine. Sounds good. Got anything to eat?"

"Sure. Brahm, why don't you show this man to the galley."

"Sure thing."

"Sir, if you'll give us one moment. Please wait beyond that hatch over there." The man complied and Banga reeled Brahm in with a gesture. "Find out what you can about him. Don't piss him off, but ask questions. A lone civilian in a stealth-fighter doesn't make sense to me."

"Me neither, boss. Do you also notice some weird things about him? How he knew that Jeff was the navigator? And how he avoided telling us exactly how long he was stranded out here?"

"Yeah, I picked up on that. One other thing that gets me too: Sherr or anyone else never mentioned anything about a warning, only that the Harvest orbital platform found something. Then, we lost contact with this place. Be careful. I think there's more to this mystery man than meets the eye."

## 9. The Covenant

**\*\*Chapter 9 "The Covenant\*\***

**\*\*Deployment +170 Hours:35 Minutes:05 Seconds (First Lieutenant Banga Mission Clock)/\*\***

**\*\*CMA \_Argo\_, Harvest Colony, nearby asteroid field\*\***

"How did you get away?" Brahm asked as the man shoveled food into his mouth.

"I didn't. I'm stuck here, hiding like you in the asteroid field. They attacked as soon as I arrived here. So I hid here, until help would come." He immediately went back to consuming as much food as he could, as fast as he could.

"Where'd you come from?"

"From Reach."

"We came from Reach too. We're on a scouting mission. We heard that contact was lost, so they sent us. It's a good thing you sent a warning. I don't know if the boss will like it, but we can wait here until reinforcements arrive."

"No dice. We have to leave now. We are outgunned and outmatched. You have no idea."

"What makes you say that? There's only one ship. It's got some advanced weapons, sure, but it couldn't possibly be any match for a destroyer or cruiser. Heck, they're probably already on the way."

"No, they're not. I told them everything I could about how the Covenant works. I saw the whole thing from right here in the asteroid field. I saw everythingâ€¦ They murdered the place, bombarded every square mile with some sort of high-impact energy weaponry. I watched as frigates and corvettes tried to take it down. They were a joke to it. It has some sort of energy shielding that we can't touch."

"But a destroyer group from Reach?"

"Won't happen. Not unless they send at least five of them. Maybe they could take it down then, but there's no telling how strong their shields are."

"So what do you do for a living?" Brahm asked, switching to a careless tone.

"Uhâ€¦ I'm a civilian contractor with the government."

"Ah. 'Cause you look more like a soldier."

"I used to be in. Got out."

"What outfit?"

"376th out of Jericho VIII."

"Hey, small world! I got a Brother in there! Who was your platoon commander?"

"What is this, twenty questions?"

"Sorry, man. Just tryin' to make conversation."

He watched as the man ate his meal efficiently and feverishly, his posture like that of a flagpole poleâ€"perfectly upright.

"My name is John, by the way," he added as he extended a hand.

"My name is Al. Alvin, but you can call me Al for short."

Brahm reverted his tone back to serious. "So how did you get inside that old, rusted out fighter-craft?"

"It was the only thing the company had at the time."

"So what sort of business takes you from Reach to Harvest in a stealth-fighter?"

"Can't I just eat and answer questions later?"

"No problem, man. I'll be in the bridge if you need anything."

The intercom crackled. "\_Brahm, get to your console! We've got

company!\_"

Brahm ran, skipped, hopped, and shuffled over precarious walkways and ladders to his station. He took a peek into the scopes. "\_Five new contacts!\_" He looked once more. "Holy shit," he said to himself. "They brought the cavalry."

"\_Make sure you monitor their courses. We may have to jump very soon. And where the hell is that one that was in orbit?\_"

"\_Gone. Out of view.\_"

Banga was elated at the fact that the first ship was behind the planet, but now there were five more out there. He couldn't risk the jump. Not now. He'd have to hide a bit longer.

Al ran from the galley to the bridge. "More company?".

"Lotsâ€¦We need to break contact with your ship if we're going to maneuver out here."

"Okayâ€¦Wait!"

"Make it quick," Banga demanded.

"Before we let it go, we may have some use for it."

"I'm listening."

"We can lure the Covenant away from us. Then we can jump free and clear."

"And how do you suppose we do that?"

"Look at your ship. It's stealth. We can make it. We send out my ship as a lure. They bite; we run."

"\_It could work\_, " said Brahm through the comm.

"But they'll destroy it in a heartbeat," Banga added.

"Maybe it's time you show your men how good of a pilot you really are," Al said with a glimmer in his eye. "Remote-pilot it. Dodge their weapons for as long as possible while we jump."

"Why would they even care about the \_Prometheus?\_"

"They cared about the \_Argo\_, didn't they?"

"Hmm," Banga mulled the prospect over with his hand rubbing his chin.

"Sir," the civilian said. "They fight like animalsâ€¦ferocious and unyielding. They'll engage anything. They aren't afraid. Send it out and we can jump. It's the only way \_now\_."

Banga didn't take his eyes off the civilian, Al, as he queued the intercom. "\_Pryor, get the Prometheus off our back. Rig it up for remote-pilot. And Dufraine, help him get the NOVA into it.\_"

## 10. The Flight to Reach

**\*\*Chapter 10 "The Flight to Reach\*\***

**\*\*Deployment +170 Hours:55 Minutes:00 Seconds (First Lieutenant Banga Mission Clock)/\*\***

**\*\*CMA \_Argo\_, Harvest Colony, nearby asteroid field\*\***

"Here goes!" Banga shouted as the \_Prometheus\_ undocked itself from the \_Argo\_.

She purged away with diminutive micro-bursts from the chemical thrusters and was off.

"Bringing up telemetry now," said Selonke. "You should be okay. I'm using the Clarions as relays in case she falls out of range."

"Good job, Jeff. Let's see how good the Covenant can turn and burn."

Brad darted the Prometheus towards the northern pole of Harvest—the most likely spot to get the interlopers' attention. The telemetry package displayed the fore view of the \_Prometheus\_ in real time. Peering around the edge of the asteroid belt to the left was an epic-scale fusion reactor...the system's star, shining brilliantly just like this plan. Stray debris from the now-disrupted asteroid field left their niche and skittered here and there. The \_Prometheus\_ cleared the asteroid belt and was closing fast to what was once Harvest—a beeline straight to it. A cosmic jury of a trillion stars surrounded the entirety, looking down on the whole scene in prudence.

"\_Prometheus detects two contacts off to port. Range: fifty-thousand kilometers and closing. They're biting,\_" Brahm announced.

"\_The others?\_"

"\_Still no sign. Most likely on the other side of the planet.\_"

"Well let's wake them up," Banga said to himself. He approached the zenith of the fiery sphere, rolled into a twelve gee bank, and put her in the exosphere at twenty-two kilometers per second.

"\_Three more contacts in pursuit, rounding the hemisphere!\_"

"\_Range?\_"

"\_Five-thousand kilometers.\_"

"Just one more sucker," Brad told himself.

"\_New contact, dead ahead! Prometheus detects collision in ten!\_"

Banga boggled in his seat. "\_Pryor, arm that NOVA, now!!!\_"

Banga saw the Covenant craft come into view, dead ahead, slightly cocked to the left at about eleven' o'clock. Its bulbuous prow almost overshadowed the planet hovering just below. "I'm going to try and avoid it. Selonke, get us out of this asteroid field and make ready to jump on my mark. The timing has to be perfect!"

"Aye!"

Banga arranged the \_Prometheus'\_ aft sensors on screen. Five Covenant ships in back and one in front. He clicked back over to the fore view. The Covenant ship was nearly nose to nose with her. Then, a pinpoint of blinding light winked on at the Covenant ship nose as it ground to a halt. The blue illumination was so bright that even after full attenuation from the optical AGC circuits aboard both the \_Prometheus\_ and \_the \_Argo\_, \_Banga's face lit up in a pale-blue radiance as he wathed the screen. Just as quickly as the flash appeared, it struck the port side of the \_Prometheus\_ as she flew by.

"\_Pulse lasers!\_" Holmes shouted. "\_Left aileron is gone! Coolant leak out the side\_"

Banga tried to make sense of the transmission he received in the view screen. The ship was obviously listing out of control from the hit. There was no recovery. He couldn't make out anything from the frantic gyrations of the \_Prometheus\_. "\_Gimme the drones\_" Banga ordered Brahm.

The feed from the \_Prometheus\_ snapped off and was replaced by the video stream from Clarion II. He now had a panoramic view of the whole scene just above Harvest. They all took the bait. All six of them. They were still behind the \_Prometheus\_â€|and more importantlyâ€|behind Harvest. The Covenant broadcast one final message to the \_Prometheus\_ as crimson-red blobs coalesced along their lateral lines, preparing to decimate the CMA lure. The Covenant's message was picked up by the \_Prometheus\_ and the spy drones, which relayed it to the \_Argo\_â€|to the crew's ears.

\_Your destruction is the will of the Godsâ€|and we are their instrument.\_

"\_Send them to hell!\_"

A new sun appeared behind Harvest. It grew larger at a frightening pace, spreading forth its corona of pure energy in all directions. It became a Titan. It engulfed the sweltering ghost-planet inside. Shockwave and light ray and gamma particle streaked past the rim, towards space, towards Bradâ€|

now goneâ€|

into the void.

## 11. Debriefing

**\*\*Chapter 11 â€" Debriefing\*\***

**\*\*/End Deployment/ 342 Hours:30 Minutes:07 Seconds  
><strong>\*\*0600 Hours, 27 April 2525 (Military Calendar)/**

><strong>\*\*Epsilon Eridani System, Planet Reach, Reach Military Complexâ€”Camp Hathcock\*\*

"I want medical teams on 'round the clock watches!" some booming voice resonated. It sank into the hazy depths of Brad's cognizance, just an echo to him. It was barely audible. He almost understood each word, but his subconscious didn't want him to. He was still technically frozen. The voice carried on every now and then with long periods of silence in between. Brad could sense the stretcher beneath him as it rolled a great distance, feeling as though the world passed him by.

He knew some time had gone by since the last sounds of those hazy words spoken in a place he couldn't remember the looks of. For now, he winked a few times at the harsh lights overhead, blazing white. It dazzled his head.

He rolled his sights around to anywhere but up, trying to come back to his normal sense of equilibrium. Tiny tracers squiggled and raced after his vision as he swept over the panels of luminous white above. As he gradually sensed relief, he picked up a scent: food. It was excellent food, the best he'd had in a while. On a nightstand to his right, there was a plate full of scrambled eggs, a square of hash browns, thick slices of bacon and all the orange juice he could wash it down with. He devoured it all in minutes.

Brad surmised that the Argo was intercepted when it entered normal space from the long return journey. He and his crew were ushered to somewhere secure on Reach. As they came to, they were placed in small rooms of their own with more than ample amounts of sustenance. By his taste, the food was one-hundred percent real. Nothing synthetic. Each room was a twenty by twenty square, nothing fancy. Just styrocrete walls, a hospital bed, as well as a camera in the upper right corner. Illuminating everything was intense fluorescent lighting overhead. The mission ended in almost the same way it started out.

Just as he finished wiping his lips with a napkin, he looked around once more: there was absolutely nothing for him in here. How long was he needed to stay? As he tried forcing himself to fall back asleep, he wondered what was next.

Then...the only door to the room swung open on heavy hinges. Outside, it was almost pitch black, intensely dark, almost troubling. The outlines of a man were visible.

Brad began to wonder where everyone else was. What happened to his crew and his ship?

The lone figure outside stepped forth. Dressed in a black suit, tall and thin he was. Mirror-black shoes tapped against the floor with every step as he approached Brad's hospital bed. That's when Brad looked up and met the man's eyes. There was nothing unusual about this person from a distance, but Brad fostered a strong hunch that this was an Intel field agent the closer he got. Matching the elegance of his business attire was a full head of silver hair, much like Pryor's, but trimmed to more precise cut. The man looked very busy with his lips pursed thin and his cheekbones tight with concentration. As the man drew nearer, he seemed too comfortable despite how fast he walked. He was definitely accustomed to this sort

of scenario. He knelt down to Brad's eye level, smiled and asked, "So, are you ready for the debrief?"

Still groggy, Brad reached to put his plate of food on the nightstand next to his simple bed. "Iâ€¦I guess so. When is it?"

"I was hoping for right now if you're up to it."

The man motioned with two fingers for a guard to bring forth a chair and it was promptly done.

Brad wasn't thrilled that the debriefing was being conducted so hastily. Brad had a lot of his own information he felt was needed to be disclosed. He always felt they demanded more, like he had to sugar coat his every action, where as being debriefed by good 'ol brass like Colonel Sherr, he could just be himself. But he was home, almost. He was surely safe. And this man in front seemed rather down to Reach despite the tell-tale signs of spookiness.

"What day is it?" Brad asked.

"It is April twenty-seventh and the time is zero-six-fifteen. You are in Camp Hathcock, Reach." He eased down into the mild steel chair and settled in. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

"Uh, no. Not really."

He lit up and took a long, slow puffâ€"held it there for a moment and then let it out just as smoothly.

"Can I bum one?" Brad asked.

"Sure." the man happily obliged. "Our records indicate you don't smoke. Why the sudden change?"

"I figured I'd start in light of recent events."

"Understandable, used to be these things would kill ya."

"I've heard that once or twice."

"Not nearly as bad as those creatures you all encountered." the man exhaled smoothly. "I had a look at those video logs. Nasty stuff. I'm Lieutenant Colonel Ackerson. I know you think the suit is odd, but I'm a special agent with the Office of Naval Intelligence and it's part of my job to blend in." he finished with a contented smile.

"A man of many hats, I see." Brad replied. "I'm sure it has its perks."

"I get to ditch the camouflage every now and then."

Brad smirked.

"So, down to business. I'd like to know a little more about the civilian you rescued during your deployment."

Brad took in a drag of his first ever cigarette, surprisingly not coughing or gagging as he drew it in, and let it out appreciatively. He nodded as he raised the cigarette up briefly before asking, "What

did you want to know?"

"How you came in contact with him, how long he was aboard your ship, and anything he said about these hostiles you encountered."

"Well, after we arrived and subsequently came in contact with the Covenantâ€"

"â€"Covenant? That's the aliens?"

"Yes. After we came in contact with them, they immediately fired on us unprovoked, so we hauled ass to this nearby asteroid field. It was then that we found Al."

"Yesâ€|Al."

"So, we brought him aboard and used his ship as a diversion to get us out of there."

"Ship's instrumentation data indicates that you then released and detonated the NOVA."

"Yes sir."

"Quite a sight. Yes?"

"Well, sure. It was...incredible."

"And what did he say about the aliens?"

"Al? He just said that they called themselves the Covenant and that we are against the Gods they worship."

"Where did he tell you he came from?"

"He said from Reachâ€|on business."

"And did he say who he works for?"

"I'm pretty sure he said he was once a Marine, now he's a private government contractor or one of those types."

"Good. Thank you."

Ackerson began to rise, checking his timepiece.

"Don't you want to know more about the Covenant?" Brad furrowed his brow, sitting straighter. "How they took out Harvest or what kind of firepower they're packing?"

"We already know." Ackerson replied, stopping short of the door. "We've had a look at the \_Argo's \_data and in accordance with official instruction, scrubbed it."

"What official instruction is this? There's a lot of personnel who need to know about this mission, sir."

"The appropriate personnel will be briefed following my visit here."

"Why scrub the \_Argo\_'s master station log, sir?"

"Tell me, Brad, how does early retirement sound?"

"I don't understand."

"Some great things are in line for you if you provide a little cooperation."

Dumbfounded, Brad answered nonetheless. "I'll cooperate no matter what, sir." he said with a challenge. "Anything you need to know. You'll have full cooperation from my men as well."

"That's good to know. Collaboration is the sole of good business." Ackerson reached into the breast pocket inside of his suit, retrieved a small datapad and pulled from his inner lapel a plastic stylus with the ONI emblem scribed into it. "I understand that you're up for retirement in the next attrition cycle. Congratulations. Here is everything to bump the pay up a little and to make it effective \_immediately\_, if you so choose."

Brad eyed the screen suspiciously as Ackerson offered it with an outstretched arm.

"You're serious?"

"Sign by all the prompts and you will settle down into the good life with a monthly stipend equivalent to seventy-five percent of Captain's pay, guaranteed, free and clear. But I caution you, it doesn't come without caveats."

Brad took a hard look at the document. "Lot better than what big Navy's gonna do for me." he uttered with an ambitious gleam in his eye.

"Certainly is, Brad. And I'll tell you what: there will be no harassment from ONI if you put your name to this NDA."

"Harassment?" Brad involuntarily gave the agent a sidelong glance, and his brow furrowed into deeper lines of concern. "Sir, did our mission go against protocol?"

"First, protocol is too exact a word for a mission with no precedent, Brad, but many have said that the \_Argo \_crew did about as well as it could have. Personally, Lieutenant, you did a commendable job, you and your team. I don't believe any other crew could have performed better. More than likely, most would have failed long before you gave the order to return to this star system. Now, we just need to make sure this incident remains under wraps. The public needn't know there's a technologically-superior alien horde out there that wipes out colonies for kicks."

"What is the CMA doing about it?"

"It is now being handled through the appropriate channels." the Light Colonel said. He then nodded solemnly, but the look in Brad's eyes was anything but convinced. "Take solace in the fact that you'll be able to spend all your time with your wife and your daughter, Vanessa. I know I would."

Brad's adrenaline spiked at the mention of his family. He didn't dare show it, though.

And Brad's own perception was still sharp despite having been flash-thawed for this event; he could sense Ackerson gauging his reactions very carefully with the kind of cryptic vigilance only an Intel officer had the ability to perfect over many years.

Something strange was going on here, something vast in scope. Why mention his family? Brad didn't quite know what to make of Ackerson's last statement. This Lieutenant Colonel did not want anyone knowing the mission's details, that was clear. It was also just now made clear that Brad's family was on the chopping block, not just the possibility of an early retirement with benefits.

Brad stared back a few heartbeats, swallowed the lump in his throat gingerly.

Whatever it was that this agent had going on under the surface, it was deep. Too deep for just a lieutenant and Brad knew it.

Brad involuntarily blinked and nodded, as if trained and told to do so like an obedient house pet. He felt a sense of foreboding regret letting himself be bullied into this situation he was now about to literally sign off on, but this was quite possibly the only option he possessed here and now. He was unprepared and out of his element against the likes of ONI types. And after all, he did complete the mission. He got everyone back safe and ONI had all the Intel they needed. He could go back to his family. Whether Brad liked it or not, signing his life away was a win-win situation, especially when the one in front knew everything about him.

"Sir, this all sounds really good. I'll take it." he said as he hastily signed the page. He gave the pen one last tap at the end of his last name before he handed it back. "Do my men get the same benefits?"

"Yes, in fact they do...and that's another thing, Brad."

"Sir?"

"I know your mission is over and you want to get back to your family and friends, but this is a time to choose wisely which friends you remain in contact with."

"Are you saying I can't contact my crew?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying. Any slip up, especially in public places, could allow disclosure of classified information to unprivileged eyes and ears and that would just make things messy."

Ackerson once again stared into Brad, rhythmically slapping the plastic stylus into the palm of his other hand.

Brad got the drift. He'd heard of the members of this clandestine organization, how they operated...sometimes above the law. Just then, the door to the cell opened and another man in a suit appeared in the threshold. Ackerson shot up from his chair like lightning.

As if perceptive of Ackerson's apprehension, the guard waiting outside instantly came into view. "Sir, he had clearance."

Ackerson casually turned his back to the newcomer in what was tantamount to disrespect and trained his cool gaze back on Brad as he sat down. He pointed a thumb toward the exit and said, "Beat it, Watts."

The guard approached the newcomer's side, waiting for him to comply before he'd resort to any use of force. The other agent stood there and panned his sour expression off of Ackerson. As he looked to Brad, his demeanor changed.

Brad was unable to tell what just happened.

After the guard escorted that agent away, Brad sat straighter. "So what's going to happen to Al?"

"That's an entirely new matter. Good day to you, \_Captain\_. We'll be watching."

Lieutenant Colonel Ackerson got up and walked away, never to be seen by the crew of the \_Argo\_ again.

\*\*\_The story continues with HALO Genesis: The Last Drop...\_\*\*

End  
file.